Writing to survive: A commentary on Sidonius Apollinaris, Letters Book 7, volume 1: The episcopal letters 1-11

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Summary

This dissertation is a commentary on the first eleven letters in the 7th book of letters, written in the seventies and eighties of the 5th century AD by Sidonius Apollinaris, bishop of Clermont, capital of the Auvergne. The letters form a coherent whole. Sidonius wrote them to a number of fellow-bishops in Gaul. They are all either directly or indirectly concerned with the state of war between 470 and 475 in Clermont, which was a Roman bastion, kept safe by Sidonius in the face of the advancing Goths. During this crisis Roman culture and Catholic Christendom were at stake for Sidonius; he wanted to defend both at all costs, particularly in view of the uncertain future. He was outraged when the Roman government surrendered the Auvergne behind his back. A year later in 476, traditionally recognized as the year of ‘the fall of the Roman empire’, the Visigoths also conquered Provence; this removed the last remnant of Roman authority in Gaul. Sidonius and many others had to adjust to a new balance of power.

The commentary raises a large number of issues, with the aim of creating a clear picture of Sidonius, his times, his ideas and his language, and, more generally, of Late Antiquity, the period between 250 and 800 AD. The study of this period has, particularly during the last forty years, given it its own identity, and a picture has emerged not exclusively of decadence and decline, but also of transition and the development of new ideas. Within this framework a fresh evaluation of aesthetics in Late Antiquity has taken place. The dissertation aims to apply these new ideas to the interpretation of Sidonius and his letters, and it also offers some possible new lines of thought. Hopefully, new insights will be added to the traditional philological-historical commentary by applying some modern views from the field of linguistics and literary theory to this late antique text.

The General Introduction contains seven chapters. After the first preliminary chapter the second deals with the life and work of Sidonius (Lyon ca. 430 – Clermont ca. 485, from a family of the highest-placed Gallo-Roman civil servants, son-in-law of the emperor Avitus and city prefect of Rome, later bishop of Clermont; poet, liturgist and letter-writer).

Chapter 3 presents the historical and social context: the Visigoths and Burgundians, who in the course of the fifth century took over Roman Gaul, the end of Roman Clermont, after dogged resistance, the Gallo-Roman nobility, which out of necessity managed for the most part to adjust to the new political reality; it also covers the intellectual life of the fields of theology, philosophy and literature (Sidonius’ efforts mainly concerned literature).

Chapter 4 discusses the organization of the Catholic Church in Gaul, the monastic trait within the dominant theology, which was responsible for the rejection of Augustine’s doctrine of predestination, the worship of saints and the development of the liturgy, and the role of the bishop, which in Gaul, as elsewhere, became more and more important, which in turn offered the nobility the opportunity to exercise power on a local and regional level by switching to the hierarchy of the Church, since careers in the service of the empire became less and less possible. This is followed by a discussion of Sidonius’ network, and of the Council of Arles, which took place in the early seventies; this matters partly because of its agenda (the theological debate about predestination), but mainly because of the insights it provides into the episcopal hierarchy of that time. It becomes apparent that Sidonius, in spite of his vast network, stood on the sidelines when it came to decision-making.
Chapter 5 is about epistolography. It discusses the role of letters in social intercourse, and the bearing this has on their form and content. Sidonius follows the model of Pliny the Younger and Symmachus in his correspondence, but publishes longer, more complex letters. In Sidonius it is pre-eminently this complexity which makes it possible to express the existential urge to survive in a time of crisis: ‘writing to survive’, as the title of the dissertation says. Next, the chapter deals with the manuscript tradition of the letters; this is exceptionally chaotic and full of lacunae with regard to book 7; the traditional order of the letters turns out to be the most likely one. A paragraph about the classification of letters according to their purpose follows; the conclusion is that Sidonius deems fit to use the system in his own way. A discussion about the structure and meaning of book 7 ensues. It is assumed, in keeping with earlier research, that the letters in this book are connected to each other. This link is not always immediately obvious, anymore than the actual message of the individual letters, because the author puts what he wants to communicate as it were into coded language and uses an allusive technique. Much is said in a veiled and incomplete way, for the sake of politeness as well as of safety. Consequently, the interpreter has to be careful not to seek a hidden meaning behind everything. The letters are reviewed individually. Four themes emerge: politics (the struggle to save the Auvergne), society (the struggle to save the values and influence of the nobility), culture and literature (the struggle to save Romanitas), and religion (the struggle between Catholicism and Arianism, the religious conviction of Visigoths and Burgundians). The order of the letters, their themes and keywords, the allusions and the addressees together form a network of meanings, which leads to the interpretation that book 7 – and in particular the letters 1-11 – is the climax of Sidonius’ body of letters, in which all his ideals as well as his resistance are summed up. The following paragraphs deal with the formulas with which letters begin and end, and with the function of the first sentence in relation to the theme of the letters. Under the title “‘You’ and ‘I’” the chapter concludes with a discussion of the problem posed by the fact that in one and the same letter the recipient can be addressed with tu and vos. After it has been established that so far the explanations (‘polite plural’, ‘inclusive plural’) have been unsatisfactory, the interpretation breaks new ground (in which the seemingly random alternation between ego and nos with regard to the author of the letter is also taken into account): the choice between singular and plural is in the first instance not based on objective categories, such as social respect or inclusiveness, but is subjective. The difference is that between ‘near’ and ‘far’, foreground and background. Singular indicates aspects such as directness, activity, responsibility, certainty. Plural, on the other hand, looks at the person in question in ‘soft focus’, he is kept ‘out of the wind’, his involvement is not emphasised, etc.

Chapter 6, entitled ‘Art is everything’, explores Sidonius’ complex literary technique, and tries to answer the question about the whys and wherefores of his style. Firstly the intertextuality is dealt with. Direct references to the classical authors appear to be relatively few in number. On the other hand, their style and choice of words totally permeates Sidonius’ work in a more general way. Furthermore, he introduces several Bible stories in order to make a comparison with his own times. The next paragraph defines Sidonius’ style as bipolar, built on the alternation of – and the tension between – irregularity and regularity, complex combinations of words and repetition following a set pattern – in musical terms: clusters, which are about sound, and sequences which are about rhythm. To the first category belong archaisms and neologisms, realistic metaphors, variation technique and topos, and word play; to the second belong sequences (asyndeton and polysyndeton),
isocolon, redundancy and clausulae. This is followed by an examination of prose rhythm, which leads to the provisional conclusion that Sidonius uses the *cursus mixtus*, with great variety, both in the rhythmic and in the metrical patterns. Finally, an attempt is made to define this style. To define it as ‘mannerism’, as is often done, turns out to be unsatisfactory. The suggestion is made to speak of ‘formalized prose’ and ‘community art’. The exuberance of the style, and the fact that the content seems to be of secondary importance, does not mean that this prose is either lacking in taste or even a failure. The emphasis on the style is essential in order to achieve the primary objective of the correspondence, the contact with the reader. As it happens, the style can to a large extent be reproduced (‘formalized’) and is therefore recognizable and confidence inspiring (‘community art’). The everyday reality (the ‘content’) recedes to create ample space for the instinctive, musical sonority of the letter.

In the commentary part of the dissertation each letter has attached to it paragraphs concerning content and aim, dating, the addressee, the manuscripts and the above-mentioned problem of ‘’You’’ and ‘I’’. Besides, there are, among other things, explanations regarding the *Rogations*-fast days, the worship of relics, the role of comedy in letter 2, the Gallican liturgy (in particular the part of the Mass called *contestatio*, *communio* (accessibility) as essential for a good bishop, the relationship between Arians and Catholics, *servitus* and *libertas* (and the idea of *res publica*) as core words in the conflict between barbarians and Romans, and the election of a bishop in Bourges under Sidonius’ direction, with the speech he gave on that occasion, which has been included in the collection as number 9, together with the accompanying letter.

The book concludes with appendices, which account in more detail for some of the issues, and with a bibliography.